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ABSTRACT

This review of research on instructional improvement and teacher evaluation considers the complex issues affecting the K-8 principal's ability to enhance educational quality through effective supervision of the instructional process. According to several studies, teachers found formal evaluations far less valuable than direct assistance and support. A recent study of improving school systems found that teacher evaluations focus on the formative process of observing teachers, arranging conferences with them, and recognizing them as professionals. Some studies found uniform procedures unsatisfactory because teachers vary widely in their abilities, experiences, styles, and needs. The studies suggest that principals need to take their own strengths and weaknesses as instructional leaders into account and obtain appropriate assistance in the instructional improvement effort. Experienced teachers can be a valuable source of such assistance because they understand the situations faced by other teachers and are trusted by them. The twofold role of the teacher supervisor--as a performance rater and as a guide to improvement--must be clear to both the supervisor and the teachers. Those who help teachers develop instructional improvement plans should be aware of the developmental phases identified in the research: diagnostic, tactical, and strategic. The process involves identifying and enhancing the "level of abstraction" at which each teacher operates. (PGD)

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Instructional Improvement and the K-8 Principal

Carl D. Glickman

The educational literature is not without its mythological figures, one being the magical principal who creates an instructionally effective school while handling all matters of discipline, parent concerns, community affairs, schedules, grant writing, and facility maintenance—a principal who visits every teacher's classroom every day and conducts formal observations of each teacher once a week . . . chairs staff development committees . . . revises the curriculum as the need arises . . . and takes a prominent role in community matters.

Anyone who believes this depiction of the school principal might well be interested in buying a hardly worn bridge in Brooklyn. The reality is that principals of improving schools need not be superhuman. It is not necessary that they inspire awe among their peers or move people to tears with their oratory. The more accurate description of them is that they care about the students and the teachers, deeply value excellent instruction, and want their schools to be better. They see their role as being one of supporter and coordinator. The traditional practice of using power and authority to control the faculty's actions is shifted to a more collegial approach in which improvements are achieved by involving faculty and systemwide personnel in making basic decisions. (Pratzner, 1984; MacKenzie, 1983; Purkey and Smith, 1985). In other words, it is not the principal as the sole source of school improvement but rather the principal as manager of a coordinated, cooperative effort.

Much of the professional preparation for school principals in seminars, leadership institutes, and certification programs assumes that instructional improvement is equated with tight procedures, observation ratings, and written records for purposes of evaluating teachers for contract renewal. Consider, then, a recent study of improving school systems that involved more than 60 elementary and middle schools in which school personnel were asked to identify those factors contributing to their school's success. Rarely was teacher evaluation mentioned (Glickman, 1986). Instead, the respondents credited direct assistance and support given to teachers with materials and record keeping; conferences held with teachers to review plans for helping individual students or particular classes; involvement of teachers on committees to coordinate curriculum; the use of staff development time for teachers to plan together on departmentwide and schoolwide decisions concerning such matters as tests, teaching materials, promotion standards, and attendance.

Kauchak, Peterson, and Driscoll (1984) in their study of the value of teacher evaluations found that teachers do not really mind the once- or twice-a-year evaluations they receive but feel that such exercises do little or nothing to improve their performance in the classroom. In most cases, evaluation is seen as a ritual carried out between principals and teachers to be endured as part of the game but with little meaning to either participant. This is not meant to question the utility of contract renewal evaluations or other rating procedures which ensure that employees are conforming to basic requirements. However, in most schools such procedures affect only a fraction of the teachers—those who are grossly incompetent—and has no relevance for the remainder.

A characteristic of improving schools is that—as distinguished from the minimum competence ratings associated with contract renewal—evaluations focus on the formative process of observing teachers and arranging conferences with them, and in general on recognizing teachers as professionals.

(It is interesting to note the finding by Brookover et al. (1979) that improving schools had a higher degree of dissatisfaction with instruction

Carl D. Glickman is a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Supervision, University of Georgia, Athens.

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among teachers, whereas teachers in declining schools expressed satisfaction with their competence as instructors and felt no need or stimulus to be better. If the only observation a teacher receives is with someone who fills out a checklist evaluation that gives rankings on a scale of from poor to excellent, without discussion of ways to become more successful, the result is bland satisfaction—most teachers receive above average marks—but little change.)

A considerable body of current classroom research focuses on uniformity in supervising teachers. In many cases, supervisors are trained to use the same observation instrument for all teachers, look for the same kinds of behavior and the same elements of a lesson, and structure a post-conference in such a way that a set number of strengths are cited prior to the mention of any weaknesses. What such uniformity of practice ignores is that first, teaching is far from being an exact science; that second, different teachers are in different stages of personal and professional development; and that third, supervising and teaching inevitably involve problems that are unclear, messy, and rarely have a single correct answer.

The research used to justify a focus on uniformity is derived from studies of short-term gains in academic achievement and generally finds that teachers who use a particular approach (e.g., direct instruction, corrective feedback, whatever) tend to be more effective than those who do not. Yet the same studies involve teachers who do not use those practices and still achieve equally high results, and teachers who do use them and achieve poor results (Doyle, 1984). One recent study of teachers trained in effective classroom practice showed that after the first year of implementation, the trained teachers had *poorer* achievement in mathematics than a comparable group of teachers who had not been trained (Stallings, 1985). To say that the jury is still out on whether there is a science of teaching is an understatement.

Teacher evaluation must be a cognitive —not mechanical— undertaking.

The potential for confusion inherent in that fact is compounded when a teacher is subjected to a post conference in which the principal uses a uniform evaluation document—with no room for accommodation to that teacher's uniqueness.

Most beginning teachers feel most comfortable (and improve most readily) when their supervisors take a directive approach, suggesting specific techniques (Copeland, 1980; Copeland and Atkinson, 1978; Lorch, 1981). Most experienced teachers, on the other hand, prefer a more collaborative and nondirective approach (Konke, 1984; Ginkel, 1983). Moreover, even with teachers on the same experience level, the responses to a fixed rating system may vary so much as to make the results confusing and questionable. A study of supervisors using a directive approach with student teachers found that they variously engendered acceptance, inaction, and resistance (Brown, 1975).

The fact is that to be consistently inconsistent, based on informed judgments of teachers' differences, is to recognize that working with teachers is a cognitive enterprise, not a mechanical application of a set prescription.

Meaningful teacher evaluation and sensible flexibility in teacher relationships are basic to achieving and maintaining instructional improvement. No principals are likely to bring improvement about unilaterally, but it is their responsibility to be sure that it occurs.

A good place to begin is to consider such questions as these:

- Where does instructional expertise exist within the school and school system?
- Are there teachers who would welcome assisting one another or serving on task forces to look at particular instructional, curricular, or in-service activities for the school?
- Are there central office personnel or consultants who are perceived by teachers as credible resources who could be called upon for help?
- Are there grade level heads, lead teachers, or assistants whose inclinations and responsibilities could be more fully brought to bear on instruction?

The secret to success in improving instruction is for principals to identify what they realistically can or cannot do themselves and then to find people who can fill in the gaps and take instructional leadership roles. In one school perhaps a faculty council could be made responsible for schoolwide instructional matters. In another school the staff

might ask central office supervisors to take part. In still others, part of the responsibility might be assigned to an assistant principal or lead teacher. The important consideration is not who is named captain but whether instructional leadership occurs and schoolwide instructional improvement results. (Farrar and Flakus-Mosqueda, 1986).

With the advent of career ladder arrangements in many states, there is now an opportunity to give senior and master teachers greater responsibilities in this area. Principals will of course need to protect these teachers from such administrative diversions as scheduling, discipline, and clerical work so they can focus their attention on assisting other teachers, chairing decision-making groups, and working with curriculum (Glickman and Wright, 1986; Lortie, 1986).

The principal will also need to separate instructional improvement from contract renewal ratings and move to a more sophisticated level of evaluation aimed at specific improvement. It is startling to note that 50 percent of experienced teachers in a particular state had *never* had an evaluation in which observation in their classroom was followed by a conference with another professional to discuss specific instructional improvement (Blankenship and Irvine, 1985). Yet rarely do teachers allow their real classroom to be seen or real problems to be examined when the principal comes on in the role of "boss" and judge. It is when the principal is seen as guide and helper that teachers feel free to be open and candid—and ready for counsel. Somehow, then, an accommodation must be found between the principal as rater and the principal as guide.

Here are four ways by which schools have sought to reach this accommodation:

1. *Establish a two-track, three-year program of two cycles of observations and conferences per year with each teacher.*

The mentor vs. the guide—four ways to try to accommodate the difference.

On track one, teachers are observed by the principal in accordance with a standard form used throughout the school system for contract renewal purposes. Teachers judged satisfactory move into track two, which focuses on instructional improvement. Observations for the remainder of the three years are focused on assistance and improvement and involve three phases—pre-observation, observation, and post-conference—leading to the development of an instructional improvement plan. No rating scale or formal records are passed to any other party. The less successful teachers remain in track one until they pass the required evaluation (perhaps with help arranged by the principal), or are removed from employment.

2. *Divide the process so that the evaluation procedures and the instructional assistance procedures are recognized and discrete.*

One way for doing this is to develop an instructional improvement sequence in which each teacher chooses an instructional improvement goal to focus on and selects the sources of assistance felt to be most helpful in achieving it (see Glatthorn, 1984). Possible sources of assistance include a school administrator, a teacher from the same school, a central office supervisor, a teacher from another school, or perhaps some other suitable professional. The teacher discusses the year's plan with a designated coordinator (school principal, department head, or team leader) and arranges visitation schedules. The normal contract evaluation process conducted by the school principal continues throughout the year, independent of the instructional improvement program.

3. *Establish separate roles for supervisors.*

In some school districts, central office supervisors conduct all formal evaluations and the principals provide instructional improvement assistance. More often it is the other way around, with principals conducting evaluations and central office or school-based personnel (e.g., counselors, assistant principals, head teachers) providing assistance. In either case, one position is clearly delineated as a staff position concerned with assisting teachers and another position is clearly delineated as a line position concerned with evaluating teachers.

4. *Make it clear that the principal will play two distinctly different roles in evaluating teachers.*

If the responsibilities of evaluation and assistance reside in the same person, teachers need to clearly understand which is involved on a given occasion. With the 98 percent of teachers who are rated competent, the principal should stress that subsequent evaluations will focus on their needs and goals and on strategies for

helping them progress professionally. Similarly, the few teachers about whom the principal has concerns should be told at the outset that the purposes of the observations and conferences are to appraise current level of practice, document strengths and weaknesses, provide remedial help, and ultimately determine the evaluation sent to the superintendent and school board. The principal's role is not likely to be clear unless it is clearly communicated.

Regardless of how the roles of rater and guide are accommodated, those who work with teachers on developing instructional improvement plans should be aware of three phases: diagnostic, tactical, and strategical (Gordon and Glickman, 1984; Glickman and Gordon, in press for 1987). The basic goal is not simply to demonstrate new techniques but to help each individual teacher grow toward higher stages of thought. The rationale is two-fold: First, more reflective and self-directed teachers are better able to solve instructional problems and meet students' educational needs (Murphy and Brown, 1970; Parkay, 1979); and second, if they are to help students become self-responsible learners and decision makers, teachers must themselves be autonomous and independent (Calhoun, 1985). Thoughtful teachers generate thoughtful students.

In phase one, the supervisor begins by diagnosing the level at which a teacher is functioning, the key being the level of "abstraction" the teacher exhibits. Teacher "abstraction" is derived from conceptual systems theory (Harvey, Hunt, and Schroeder, 1961) and is defined as the ability to form "more orientations towards the environment and the interpersonal world" (Sullivan, McCullough, and Stager, 1970). Abstraction is not to be confused with innate intelligence, being a variable that can be changed and that parallels the experiential learning research of Horn and Cattell (1967).

Three levels of "abstraction" and their implications for supervision.

Teachers of low abstraction have difficulty identifying instructional concerns, are unable to generate alternative solutions, and are quick to seek advice when confronted by a complex task. Teachers of moderate abstraction can define instructional problems (usually centering on a single dimension of the problem) and generate a limited range of possible solutions. They want independence but seek assistance in selecting and prioritizing solutions and in thinking through the implementation steps of the improvement plan. Teachers of high abstraction can identify problems from a wide source of information and can imagine various strategies, anticipate consequences, and select appropriate courses of action. Highly abstract teachers follow the problem-solving task through to completion, taking full responsibility for the outcome of their efforts.

The supervisor's diagnosis is done not by a paper and pencil test but by talking with the teachers involved and observing them in action. Clues are to be found in how teachers respond to such questions as "What needs do you see for instructional improvement?" "How do you know that they are significant concerns?" "What should be done?"

Phase two is tactical, aimed at helping teachers solve current instructional problems, and calls for an approach adapted to the teacher's current level of abstraction. The supervisor selects a *directive/informational* approach with teachers of low abstraction, a *collaborative* approach with teachers of moderate abstraction, and a *nondirective* approach with teachers of high abstraction.

In the *directive/informational* approach, the supervisor provides a high degree of information and advice and thus assumes much of the responsibility for developing the instructional improvement plan—not to control the teacher but to give specific suggestions the teacher can choose among.

In the *collaborative* approach, with teachers of moderate abstraction, the supervisor and teacher share perceptions of whatever problems exist, agree on alternatives, and negotiate a mutually designed plan of action. The supervisor and the teacher are thus partners who share responsibility for the final plan.

In the *nondirective* approach with teachers of high abstraction, the teachers are called upon to define their instructional concerns, generate actions, explore consequences, and develop their own action plans. With the teacher carrying the chief responsibility, the supervisor's role is to listen, reflect, clarify, and encourage.

The final phase in this approach is strategical and aims at accelerating the development of teacher abstraction—helping teachers to think "harder and smarter" and stimulating their problem-solving abilities. One strategy is to expose teachers incrementally to new ideas, new ways of viewing students and instruction, new problem-solving techniques, and new teaching methods . . . initially relating such new ideas to concepts the teachers already understand and value and then exposing them to a wider range of concepts and innovations (see Hall and Loucks, 1978).

A second strategy is to move teachers from a dependency relationship with the supervisor by decreasing the role of the supervisor while increasing the decision-making responsibility of teachers. In a third strategy, the supervisor arranges for interaction among teachers of lower levels of abstraction and those of somewhat higher levels during problem-solving sessions. Such "optimal mismatches" (Hunt, 1971, pp. 9-10) can result in conceptual growth for teachers of lower abstraction.

Summing up, to be successful in managing instructional improvement, K-8 principals need to reflect on the history of the organization involved, the capabilities of the staff, resources available from outside the school, and the values and long-range goals that are to set the framework for the effort. With this information, they can make realistic determinations regarding such matters as the optimum structure and setting, the time span involved, and the human resources that will be needed. How and who attends to instructional improvement will vary from school to school; what is common to success is the skill of the principal in stimulating discussions and options among the faculty that bear undeviatingly on improving instruction and help all teachers achieve their full potential.

With instructional improvement, the key to success lies with the principal.

That is not a simple task, given the inevitable array of conflicting pressures. Unless the principal is successful in doing so, however, the school will simply exist as a collection of individual teachers and students going their own way without larger purpose or the exhilaration of accomplishment.

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